
Chapter 5

ASSESSMENT



How can we tell if students know and can apply social studies concepts? How will we know when they have reached a desirable level of proficiency in history, geography, economics, and government? These questions are the reason that assessment is such an essential element in education—it is the only way we will ever be able to answer them. Assessing the progress of student learning and evaluating the effectiveness of social studies programs are also vital concerns in developing a valid, workable social studies curriculum. Assessment provides the critical data needed for planning, monitoring, and modifying social studies programs. Assessment information can help teachers, students, and their families focus on student learning and evaluate student progress. In short, assessment provides evidence of learning.

Assessments help build more effective social studies programs when the kinds of assessments we use to monitor student learning are closely related to what we want students to learn (curriculum) and how we are teaching it (instruction). Assessment results should be communicated to students and parents and used by the teacher to guide instruction and design curriculum.

In addition to reflecting and supporting curriculum and instruction, assessments should measure both knowledge and skills. For example, a classroom multiple-choice test may provide sufficient information about student learning of

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the facts about the American Revolution or the names of rivers and lakes. However, if teachers also expect students to create a time line, interpret documents, or develop a demand schedule, they may find that open-ended questions or, at the classroom level, projects or other examples of student work may provide more useful information about what students are able to do.

Our goal for all of the students in South Carolina is that they become adequately prepared for their lives in the twenty-first century. While it is difficult for us

to imagine today what their lives will be like decades from now, we know that their success in the future and the success of American democracy itself may well be affected by their ability to use knowledge about the world and its peoples. Students also must be able to use appropriate methods for interpreting this information if they are to understand the issues and participate as educated citizens.

Effective social studies assessments will require students to use the process skills in demonstrating that they have met the standards of learning.

Social studies assessment in South Carolina must assure that students

- are knowledgeable about social studies facts and methods and
- can use their knowledge and skills and can apply what they know about social studies to their everyday work and home lives.

Improving social studies assessment in South Carolina involves reviewing not only district and

state accountability assessments but also the classroom assessments used by teachers for monitoring student progress and achievement. Improved social studies assessments will require students to use a knowledge base about events, peoples, places, economic concepts, and governments to connect facts and ideas and to address practical, real-world social studies–related problems. Students have to use the process standards in demonstrating this knowledge. Such assessments might ask students to analyze historical events, take and defend a position about an issue, read a topographical map, or explain an amendment to the Constitution.

Criterion-referenced assessments tell us how well a student is doing compared to standards or criteria in the subject area (e.g. percentage of items correct).

Purposes of Assessment

The primary reason for assessment is to improve student learning. Therefore, the statewide system should include assessment for instructional purposes (to inform teaching) and assessment for accountability (to inform the system). Effective assessments determine what students know and are able to do, as well as what they do not know or cannot do. Assessment results must be provided to students, teachers, parents, school administrators, school boards, policy-makers, and the public.

Overall, assessment serves these purposes:

- ***To improve social studies instruction and learning.*** Good assessments support social studies instruction designed to help students become active learners and problem solvers. Good teachers use assessment results to improve social studies instruction and learning by modifying instructional practices to address areas of weakness.

A comprehensive and equitable social studies assessment system should include a variety of formats, including traditional items and performance tasks.

- ***To motivate students and help them focus their learning efforts.*** Assessment results should give students information that helps them identify their strengths and weaknesses. Classroom

assessments, in particular, should provide explicit and detailed feedback about student performance.

- ***To report academic achievement and progress.*** Reporting assessment results provides a way of communicating with students and parents about student achievement. Results of assessments inform students about their progress and assist them in making decisions about their individual

academic goals. Assessment results can also provide parents with information critical to understanding their children’s academic progress and to making decisions about future academic pursuits.

- ***To select students for admission to programs.*** Comparing assessment results to program standards allows teachers and administrators to make informed decisions when recommending students for particular programs. Results of assessments provide a means to match student achievement with program standards.

- ***To determine the effectiveness of social studies programs.*** Assessments inform students, teachers, administrators, and the public about the types of changes or improvements necessary for educational programs to meet their potential goals. Educators can use the results of assessments

to set directions for future development of social studies education programs.

- **To provide accountability.** Assessment results allow policy-makers to decide what changes in policy or distribution of resources may be necessary to deliver the highest quality social studies education for *all* students. Analyzing the results of local and statewide assessments helps those responsible for the system to make informed decisions affecting South Carolina’s schools.

Assessment Strategies

A variety of assessment strategies—including traditional, authentic, and performance-based assessments—should be used to measure student progress and gain information about instructional practices in the social studies classroom. Performance assessment involves everyday problems in which students are given the opportunity to make decisions and apply what they know. Performance-based assessments require students to complete a task, to construct a response that demonstrates knowledge of a skill or process, or to create a product. Performance-based assessments in social studies reflect classroom instructional methods that emphasize a hands-on approach to the interpretation of issues and problems.

Assessments in social studies might include such activities as

- demonstrations by students of their social studies knowledge as a part of exhibits or debates,
- student-teacher interviews,
- student presentations of the pros and cons of issues,
- student entries in journals,
- student samples of work,
- participation in civic events, service learning (voluntary),

A norm-referenced test provides information on how a student is performing compared to students in a norm or comparison group (and is typically reported through percentiles).

- student reports on events and issues, and
- student responses to open-ended questions that require interpretation and analysis of documents and data.

More traditional assessments include pencil-and-paper tests such as those containing multiple-choice questions, matching questions, true-false questions, or short-answer questions in which students are asked to recognize the correct answer, restate information, or explain a concept.

Norm-Referenced and Criterion-Referenced Assessments

Standardized tests, which are criterion-referenced tests (CRTs), tell us how well a student does compared to standards of achievement in the content area tested. For example, student performance on the 1992 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests in mathematics were reported as “basic,” “proficient,” or “advanced,” depending on the extent to which the student demonstrated proficiency in mathematics. Current state plans call for similar reporting of proficiency on statewide assessments in social studies. These tests will be constructed by the State Department of Education using the standards in this document, which are aligned with national standards.

South Carolina students in some districts also take national **norm-referenced tests** (NRTs) in social studies. Norm-referenced test results provide information on how a student is performing relative to other students in a norm or comparison group. Student scores from a norm-referenced test are reported in terms of percentiles. For example, a student whose score was at the ninetieth percentile on a norm-referenced social studies test achieved as well as or

better than 90 percent of the students in the comparison group. National NRTs in social studies are currently not administered to South Carolina students statewide.

Criterion-referenced interpretations of test data are most useful for improving instructional practices and for identifying the strengths and weaknesses of individual students in a content area. Norm-referenced interpretations are most useful for selecting students for programs in which there is a limit to the number of students who can be served; norm-referenced assessments are designed to rank students from high to low.

Use of Assessments

Assessment for Instructional Purposes

Classroom teachers, schools, districts, and the State will be responsible for assessments that address instruction. It is recommended that assessments for instructional purposes be

- aligned with previous instruction and assignments;
- varied in format, including performance-based assessments;
- ongoing in the classroom; and
- consistent with standards.

Students should be required to move beyond the basic skills and recall of content knowledge by adding to the basic skills assessments that demonstrate higher-order process skills such as

- analysis and interpretation of information and documents,
- critical reasoning,
- problem-solving, and
- application of knowledge.

Professional development opportunities—as well as sample assessments, scoring rubrics, and instruction in how to use alternative

assessments—will be available to teachers. The State Department of Education will set high academic achievement levels based on the process and knowledge standards in this document and provide feedback to schools and districts. The professional organizations should also provide leadership in improving classroom assessment practices.

Classroom assessment must be standards-based.

Assessment for Accountability: State Assessment Program

- Assessments should reflect what we want excellent social studies instruction to be. They should include open-ended questions that provide opportunities for students to demonstrate critical reasoning and problem-solving in realistic environments.
- Assessments should draw on the process skills and the knowledge standards in social studies.
- The high school exit examination, which students must pass to receive a high school diploma, will assess whether students have reached a basic, proficient, or advanced level of achievement in social studies. Questions will cover the relevant process and achievement standards in all four areas of social studies.
- All students should participate in the assessments, and a report on each student's achievement should be provided to his or her parent(s) or guardian.

Exemplary assessment takes place under the following conditions:

- ❑ **Assessments should be aligned with their intended purposes.** Assessment plays a critical role in the classroom, and teachers must take time to consider how each assessment is to be

used: what is its purpose? The type of assessment instrument will often differ with the type of achievement or progress to be measured. An assessment that is meant to be diagnostic or is used for practice should not be used to determine a student's grade. Teachers should also consider how students will use assessment information.

- ❑ **Assessments should provide information that is useful for improving learning.** Information about students' strengths and weaknesses should be provided to students, teachers, administrators, and parents so that the classroom and the social studies programs can be adjusted to improve learning. For classroom performance-based assessments, sharing the scoring rubric with students before the assessments are administered is an ideal way to convey what is expected. The rubric also provides an ideal frame for feedback to both students and parents on the results of the assessment.
- ❑ **Assessments should have a variety of formats.** Assessments should also take into account the different learning styles and intelligences of students and offer varied ways for students to demonstrate proficiency. The variety in formats offers opportunities to measure both knowledge and skills and fairly evaluate diverse groups of students.
- ❑ **Assessments should provide comprehensive feedback to students regarding their academic progress.** Assessments should not only inform students of what they have achieved but should also give them a clear picture of what they have yet to learn. In this way, students can expand their learning opportunities and knowledge.

- ❑ **Assessments should be equitable.** Assessments should offer all students optimal opportunities to demonstrate what they know and can do. Assessments should consider student differences, including ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic factors. Specific attention should be given to students with special needs.
- ❑ **Assessments should be open and ongoing.** Assessment should be an integral part of the learning process and the classroom experience. The best student evaluation is based on multiple and varied assessments made across time.
- ❑ **Assessments should measure what we want students to achieve.** The ability of students to demonstrate an understanding of the process skills and content of social studies is valued and should be tested.
- ❑ **Assessments should take advantage of new technologies.** Assessments should use multiple sources of information, such as graphics, video, sound, simulations, or interactive tasks appropriately. Technology allows students to travel beyond the classroom walls and work on tasks that would otherwise be too time-consuming, unsafe, or costly.

*Girt with such wills to do and bear,
Assured in right, and mailed in prayer,
Thou wilt not bow thee to despair,
Carolina! Carolina!*

—Henry Timrod

